



Citizenship Education for a Democratic Society

By Joel Westheimer



Few are likely to need convincing of the importance of democratic citizenship and the role for schools in pursuing it. In both Canada and the United States, there is increasing awareness that voting rates have dropped precipitously and that the biggest declines are among young people. Civic participation, many have argued, is at a decades-long low.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the accompanying dialogues on domestic security and foreign policy have further spurred educators to reexamine the role of schools in educating students to be thoughtful and engaged citizens.

We can get most folks to agree that teaching how to be a good democratic citizen is important. But when we get specific about what democracy requires and about what kind of school curricula will best promote it – much of that consensus falls away. Teachers, administrators, and students in schools that explicitly aim to

teach democratic citizenship and values hold an assortment of different and sometimes contradictory beliefs.

It should not be surprising, then, that the growing number of schools that seek to further democratic citizenship by nurturing “good” citizens embody a similarly broad variety of goals and practices. Consider the following three school programs and ask yourself which one, in your mind, is teaching democratic citizenship. The first school, which I will call Capital High School teaches democratic citizenship through lessons on personal responsibility and through a provincial requirement for community service. Since Ontario students must each complete 40 hours of volunteer community service in order to graduate, teachers at Capital help students find volunteer activities in the community, helping out in soup kitchens, cleaning up parks, and assisting in hospitals.

Teachers and administrators in a second school, which I will call The Laura Secord School, engage students in lessons about how government works and emphasize participation in civic affairs. Teachers in this school feel that democratic citizenship requires that students know about laws and about legislative procedures. They also model civic participation by involving students in classroom and school-wide decisions. By enacting democratic principles within the school, these and other like-minded educators hope to develop and sharpen students' democratic citizenship skills, and dispositions.

A third school, "River Valley," has as one of its central curricular missions to teach students about social justice, about how to improve society, and about specific ways to affect change such as community drives, grass-roots campaigns, and protests.

Although I've changed their names, each of these schools is real and each is confident that the school is engaged in citizenship education for a democratic society. What kind of citizens does each of these schools want its students to become? Will students like those in Capital High School, who volunteer in the community become "good" citizens? Do mock trials or studies of the local legislature constitute citizenship education? Is a classroom or school that is governed democratically like the Laura Secord School better suited to impart democratic lessons? Or the last school I mentioned—is an emphasis on social justice the key to democratic ideals?

Not many people agree on what a good democratic citizen does. Some programs are based on the belief that good citizens show up to work on time and pay taxes. Other educators endorse the view that citizenship entails acting decently toward the people around you. A few programs seek to teach students to help shape social policy on behalf of those in need. They want students to become aware of the difficulties involved in changing the circumstances that lead to rivers or parks being dirty or to individuals and families being hungry.

My colleague, Joe Kahne and I identified three visions of "good" citizens that help capture the lay of the land when it

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comes to citizenship education in the United States and Canada: the *Personally Responsible Citizen*; the *Participatory Citizen*; and the *Justice Oriented Citizen*. These three can serve as a helpful guide to uncovering the variety of goals and assumptions that fall under the idea of citizenship education.

The Personally Responsible Citizen. Personally Responsible Citizens contribute to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteer to help those less fortunate whether in a soup kitchen or a senior center. They might contribute time, money, or both to charitable causes. Both those in the character education movement and those who advocate community service would emphasize this vision of good citizenship. They seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work. Or they nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service.

The Participatory Citizen. Other educators see good citizens as those who actively participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state/provincial, and national levels. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and other institutions (eg. community based organizations, churches) work and about the importance of planning and participating in organized efforts to care for those in need, for example, or in efforts to guide school policies. While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive.

The Justice Oriented Citizen. A third image of a good citizen, and perhaps the perspective that is least commonly pursued, is of individuals who critically assess social, political, and economic structures and explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems. The vision of the Justice Oriented Citizen shares with the vision of the Participatory Citizen an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community. But these programs emphasize preparing students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about social movements and how to effect systemic change. If Participatory Citizens are organizing the food drive and Individually Responsible Citizens are donating food, the Justice Oriented Citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.

What Kind of Citizen is Promoted by Citizenship Education?

Currently, the vast majority of school programs that aim to teach citizenship are the kind that emphasize either good character including the importance of volunteering and helping those in need, or technical knowledge of legislatures and how government works.





Far less common are schools like the third school I mentioned: schools that teach students to analyze root causes of injustice or challenge existing social, economic, and political norms as a means for strengthening democracy. Often, when schools emphasize individual character and behavior, they shy away from teaching about social movements and the root causes of problems.

Voluntarism and kindness can be put forward as ways of avoiding politics and policy. In terms of *democratic* citizenship, these programs may be limited. Character traits such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility for one’s actions are certainly valuable for becoming good neighbors and citizens. But, on their own, these traits are not inherently about democracy. Indeed, government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship: don’t do drugs; show up at school; show up at work on time; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; etc. To be sure, these are all desirable traits for people living in a community. But they are not about democratic citizenship.

It is important for educators to recognize these different visions of citizenship so that we can embrace discussion on their relative importance in the curriculum. It is not enough to argue that democratic values and citizenship are as important as

traditional academic priorities. We must also ask what kind of values? What interests and ideas are embedded in varied notions of citizenship? An initiative that supports the development of personally responsible citizens may not be effective at increasing participation in local and national civic affairs. Moreover, efforts to pursue some conceptions of personal responsibility might undermine efforts to prepare participatory and justice oriented citizens. We also should distinguish between programs that emphasize participatory citizenship alone and those that include an emphasis on the pursuit of justice.

Those designing and teaching curriculum for citizenship education and those studying its impact must be cognizant of and responsive to these important distinctions and their political implications. The choices we make for citizenship education in our schools have consequences for the kind of society we ultimately help to create. 🍷

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Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Justice Oriented Citizen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts responsibly in their community • Works and pays taxes • Picks up litter, recycles, and gives blood • Helps those in need, lends a hand during times of crisis • Obeys laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes the importance of participation • Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment • Knows how government agencies work • Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures • Explores strategies for change that address root causes of problems • Knows about social movements and how to effect systemic change • Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice